



A Pastor's Gift of Truth

It is madness to wear ladies' straw and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.

Anne Dillard,
Teaching a Stone to Talk

I have loved you by telling you the truth.
Pastor Bob Appleby,
in a final address to his congregation,
wearing a crash helmet

While I crave eggs, sausages, and hash browns for breakfast, it is the thought of syrup-drenched French toast and coffee that I cherish now that a brain tumor has closed the present chapter of life for my beloved pastor, Bob Appleby. We broke egg-battered bread together every Tuesday morning, a precious ritual that Bob generously shared with me for nearly 12 years. We met down the street from our church in a restaurant that changed ownership and ambience thrice a decade, along with a veritable revolving door of young, tattooed, and nose-ringed waiters. Starch, sugar, and caffeine were the “comfort food” we gathered round so ritualistically, but Bob’s passion for the gospel never allowed our conversation to become too comfortable. Bob understood that while the gospel is good news, it is anything but comfortable.

The gospel was indeed discomfiting for a young ministry idealist like me back in the ’80s, fresh off of nine years with a campus parachurch organization that fancied itself “cutting-edge.” Having had such an experience, I believed I possessed all the “tools” necessary to succeed in whatever ministry I chose. Equipped with just enough to be dangerous, my ambi-

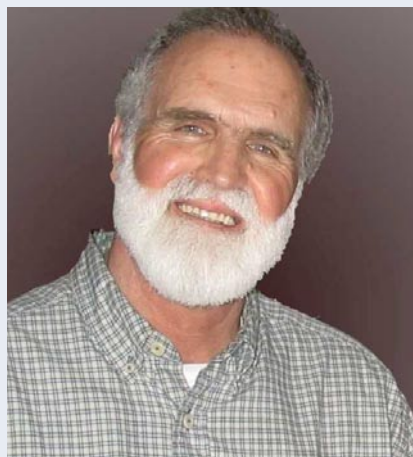
tious ego was countered only by my cursed insecurities, a perpetual pendulum swing between self-aggrandizement and self-flagellation. My grasp of reality proved inadequate. I needed the truth that Bob selflessly offered me, a gospel that challenged my calcified ideas about church and ministry and the worldly metrics of a thinly veiled heroism. Whether or not I could admit it at the time, I too often made ministry about me (a rather enduring tendency, I might add). Through powerful homily or witty sideswipe, Bob constantly reminded me, along with my fellow brothers and sisters, that it’s decidedly not about us.

If we as congregation members had our way, we would, almost without exception, make the church about us. For young marrieds, the church would primarily be a place to raise their children with decent morals and free childcare. College grads would simply try to replicate their campus fellowship and “urban-plunge” experiences. The more activist of the flock would use the church to facilitate their pet project of social justice. White-collar professionals would engineer participation to fit their schedule while showcasing their importance and respectability through positions of church leadership. For the fragile and less endowed, the congregation would

primarily exist as a rich source of emotional coddling in an otherwise harsh and unaffirming world. The ecclesiastically trendy would sign the congregation up at group discount for the next formula-driven church leadership conference at the local Hilton.

But Bob loved the church too much to allow us to settle for one bound by the limits of our small agendas and corrupted wisdom. More than for fear of congregational mediocrity or a dissatisfying pastoral experience, Bob led with deep awareness that a compromised church denies the world a chance to encounter hope for its lostness. He taught us that a congregation shaped by anything less than the gospel can never offer more, and usually offers less, than what the world is capable of producing on its own.

Because of Bob’s unswerving insistence on what is true, he was not given to flowery words or feel-good sentimentality. Some found in his unbending and sometimes abrasive posture a convenient excuse not to hear. But while Bob certainly was not without flaw, the gospel proclaimed with his life simply exacted the kind of violent response that is to be expected from sinners invested in a rebellious world. God graciously blessed us with a pastor who deemed it far more important to be *truthful* than *liked*, *prophetic* than *popular*, *Word-centered* than *innovative*. We will miss him dearly. But in delivering Christ’s whole and unedited gospel to a stubborn and resistant lot Sunday after arduous Sunday, wanting more for us than we wanted for ourselves, he has left us with a calling, the only calling truly worth losing our lives for. ■



Rev. Robert T. Appleby
1940 – 2006

Craig Wong is the executive director of Grace Urban Ministries, a congregation-based non-profit located in San Francisco’s Mission District that serves low-income families through academic tutoring, youth job-training, adult education, health services, and advocacy. He invites response to this column at onbeingthechurch@gum.org.